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Future Role of CIA Debated

FRANK SESNO: As the KGB opens up its doors and closes down some of its most notorious operations, the question inevitably arises: What's ahead for its U.S. counterpart, the CIA? Should it be reformed as well? It's a topic of considerable debate in Washington just now: Wither the spies?

Joining us, Vincent Cannistraro, former Chief of Counterterrorism at the CIA. He says it's time for change. And Donald Jameson, former CIA Operations Director. He argues the CIA should stay.

Mr. Cannistraro, let's start with you. You published yesterday an article, and op-ed piece in the Washington Post entitled "The CIA Dinosaur." Let me read from it.

"Recent international events," you write, "have rendered the CIA an obsolete tool of national security policy. The CIA should be disbanded and its necessary functions spun off to the rest of the national security bureaucracy."

Why are you ready to throw the towel in on the CIA?

VINCENT CANNISTRARO: Because I think it's time to start a debate on the needs for intelligence in the 21st century. So much of what CIA has done over the 40 years has been conditioned by the competition with the Soviet Union, but the optic of the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union has been fractured beyond repair. The Cold War is over. And therefore we need to restructure intelligence to meet the new requirements of the next century, and not fight the old battles.

SESNO: Dr. Jameson, your turn.

DONALD JAMESON: Well, I think that the idea of having a debate is a sound one. We do need to consider intelligence in a new world. But to suggest at the beginning that you take the current mechanism and throw it away, when you're dealing with your coordination, when you're talking about duplication, and deny yourself the center from which that could all be done -- and as for the Soviet Union, I am very optimistic about the political democracy, ultimately, in what was the Soviet Union. But they still have 27,000 nuclear missiles, and a great many of them can strike this country. And as long as they have those, we have to be worried about it.

SESNO: Mr. Cannistraro, what would you have replace the CIA?

CANNISTRARO: Well, I'm not arguing for less intelligence. I'm just arguing for less duplication of intelligence and less control...

SESNO: You're not suggesting to shut down that big building out at Langley.

CANNISTRARO: Oh, I'm suggesting that Moynihan's Cold War Act, which says the CIA ought to be transferred to the State Department, is a beginning. I don't believe that all of its functions can be handled by the State Department, but military intelligence should be collected by military services.

JAMESON: The military services do collect the military intelligence, by and large. That's all very true. The tactical intelligence and most of the strategic all goes through the military system. But the crucial stuff about politics, about economics and all, particularly -- think of it. In the State Department you've got a Secretary of State who seems to be hooked on Gorbachev, as the President. Suppose you're an analyst and you think that Yeltsin is the guy. As a matter of fact, as I do. What do you do? You write a big memo to the Secretary of State and count on a promotion when you're telling him he's all wrong?

But if it's the Director of Central Intelligence doing that, the analyst can have a great deal more confidence in his own...

SESNO: In point of fact, Mr. Cannistraro might point out, the CIA hasn't been terribly willing to be...

JAMESON: But it does.

CANNISTRARO: I think CIA's analysis has been poor, and it could be a lot better.

But beyond that, there's a fundamental question of tying intelligence collection to policy more closely, not keeping the ivory tower mentality, because intelligence collected in a vacuum is useless. It has to serve a purpose.

JAMESON: The State Department has its Bureau of Intelligence Research, and the Department of Defense has all the different kinds of intelligence agencies you can mention. If you're concerned about duplication, you've got to have somebody in the center who can figure out how these all try to fit together, and identify the real meaningful duplication.

SESNO: Let me ask a very simplistic question, if you'll pardon that. Do we still, does the United States still need spies?

JAMESON: Oh, yes.

CANNISTRARO: Oh, definitely. We...

SESNO: So you agree on that.

CANNISTRARO: I think we both agree that espionage is going to be a requirement for national security. It's a question of how it is done.

SESNO: Now, currently there is the CIA, there is the DIA, the Defense Intelligence, and the four branches of the military have operational...

JAMESON: Virtually none of those have spies, except the CIA.

CANNISTRARO: The CIA has a function that was set up in

1947, which was to serve a service of common concern: collect intelligence, but process it centrally and disseminate it to the requisite policymakers.

You can do that without a CIA. You can do that with A Director of National Intelligence, divorcing the hat of the Director of Central Intelligence from the hat that he wears as head of the CIA itself. That can be done by...

JAMESON: Makes him the anchorman on a news program.

SESNO: Oh my goodness. I don't know quite what you mean by that.

CANNISTRARO: Well, we don't want that.

SESNO: Let me ask you, though.

JAMESON: I think...

SESNO: Go ahead. You have something you want to say, or may I move on?

Mr. Cannistraro, one of the things you say is that the CIA has not had a very good track record. Do you think this reorganization would improve U.S. intelligence? You cite, for example, poor information on the Persian Gulf situation, poor information even on the pending coup in the Soviet Union.

CANNISTRARO: I think that's just a symptom of CIA's lack of flexibility to deal with new world problems. The new world problems are Third World problems, rather than the optic of Soviet-American competition.

JAMESON: Yeah. And when you're talking about having to

get into the High Andes and places like that, diplomats aren't really trained for that. You've got to have people that are willing to go up there, who are willing to fit into all of the varied environments which the State Department, by and large, doesn't train for. And they shouldn't.

SESNO: In a little over a week from now, the President's nominee to be Director of Central Intelligence, Bob Gates, is going to begin his nomination proceedings and confirmation hearings. They promise to be rather arduous.

What do you think of Bob Gates and the timing for CIA?

CANNISTRARO: Bob Gates is a very intelligent, very well-trained, well-prepared intelligence officer. The problem with Bob Gates is a perception of other people that he had something to do with the Iran-Contra. And that's a little black cloud over his head.

SESNO: Right man or wrong man?

CANNISTRARO: Right or wrong...

JAMESON: I would like to see Bob Gates there. I think he's a very good man for the job. But he has this -- whether he's going to be confirmed or not, I don't know. I think the Agency would profit from his being confirmed. They need somebody with guts and intelligence and knowledge.

SESNO: Dr. Jameson, Mr. Cannistraro, thank you both very much for joining us.